

BUILDING INTENTIONAL LIFELONG SAFEGUARDS

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Sharon Bourke

Part 1

Inviting People In: The importance of building and sustaining relationships with trusted people throughout a lifetime.

Part 2

Support Circles: Enduring safeguarding strategy.

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Part 1

Inviting People In: The importance of building and sustaining relationships with trusted people throughout a lifetime

An exploration of different strategies families can use to build and expand the lives of their family member who has a disability. Having a clear vision, planning for today and the future in the company of trusted others are key safeguarding strategies to ensure quality lives endure into the future.

Part 2

Support Circles: Enduring safeguarding strategy

Support Circles provide a forum where important life issues, plans and decisions can be discussed and reviewed in the company of trusted friends and family.

The ideas in this paper are based on my work with families throughout Queensland, on discussions with colleagues at Pave the Way, Mamre Assn Inc. and with other colleagues working in the area of networks and circles of support.

Building Intentional Lifelong Safeguards

PART 1- INVITING PEOPLE IN: THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING AND SUSTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH TRUSTED PEOPLE THROUGHOUT A LIFETIME

INTRODUCTION

Most people measure their quality of life in terms of the number and richness of the connections to people with whom they share their lives. In fact when people are asked to reflect on what makes a “good life”, they usually mention the importance of having loving relationships and committed people in their lives.

Our emotional and physical safety is more likely to be assured when we are surrounded by enduring relationships with committed people who help give our life fulfillment, meaning and joy. People who know and love us will care about us through good times and bad. They share our important occasions and milestones; they share our fears and sadness; they share our joys and happiness. It is normal to call on our friends and family to discuss important issues, news and problems. We seek their advice and opinions and they seek ours. They will look out for us and keep us safe emotionally and physically. Belonging keeps us safe . People keep people safe.

In a fair society, raising a family is a responsibility which is shared by the community, a notion expressed in the African proverb, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” Families understand the important roles that others play in the raising of their children, either in nurturing and/or being vigilant about their welfare. At times, parents will rely on the support and care of other family members and various people in their neighbourhood and community. Investing in these relationships also means investing in the future well being of our sons and daughters as our children’s lives will inevitably be influenced and shaped by the community in which they live.

For a person with disability, this should be no different. However, families who have a member with a disability may find themselves isolated. This isolation may have come through the sheer workload caused by the cumbersome systems on which they rely or it could be as a result of, or as a response to, hurtful attitudes of people around them. Sometimes, extraordinary effort is required in order for the person to have access to ordinary opportunities. This level of effort may leave little or no energy for making and keeping relationships within the wider community. Whatever the reason for the isolation, their quality of life and safety could well be under threat without connection to others.

Families who have experienced heartache and rejection may find it difficult to trust others or to invite others into their lives. However, the quality and depth of our relationships rely on our willingness to take risks. Although people who have a disability are often more vulnerable, which is sometimes compounded by the reluctance or ignorance of people who do not know how to engage with or welcome them, it is important to realise that vulnerability and risk are a normal part of life. Relationships can be a learning ground when we experience such things and we can learn to develop strategies for safety.

When a person with a disability has difficulty initiating contact or maintaining friendships without assistance, the family often steps in to provide safety and quality of life. Given that families are often the conduit through which their sons and daughters form and experience relationships, it is vital that families and trusted others are proactive and become skilled at seeing and seizing opportunities for relationships.

With increased awareness, families can more ably include opportunities for relationships building in all aspects of their planning for the future.

As is the case in everyone's life, relationships require intentional and deliberate actions to be sustained. Openness, honesty and clear communication are the foundations on which to build strong relationships which will enrich our lives and those of our family members. Reciprocity is the key to relationship building. Time and energy are needed to develop mutual trust. We cannot expect to reap the benefits of relationships without contributing.

Ultimately, plans and decisions which are made when people share their knowledge, energy and commitment will more likely endure into the future. With the support of trusted others, we can build the lives we want to see in the future.

Inviting People In: What do we mean?

Inviting committed allies, family and friends to assist them to plan is a way for families to create quality lives and safety for the future of their family member with a disability. Inviting chosen others to support us in our decision making can be a powerful strategy to sustain our efforts and actions. This strategy may also lead to others having a greater understanding of the person with a disability which, in itself, can lessen the likelihood of people acting toward them out of ignorance and fear. With greater understanding people begin to see that more joins us as human beings than separates us. It is from this recognition and respect of our common humanity that the foundations are laid for deepening relationships.

Despite this, it is seldom easy for families to involve others in areas of their lives where they believe they have sole responsibility. However, it is our experience that people are willing and keen to be involved but will often need an invitation as they may not want to appear to be intruding on family business. An invitation is usually seen as an honour, and when people accept the invitation, a journey begins that provides opportunities for deepened understanding. An invitation to be involved may seem rather formal. However, there is often an unexplainable magic which happens when people accept this invitation to relationship and come to share their knowledge, energy and commitment to build strong and positive lives for people with disability.

Inviting people in allows us to:

- Share important information about the future
- Attract new ideas
- Use collective wisdom
- Learn to trust in the involvement of others
- Be deliberate about decisions and actions for the future
- Have conversations that will assist to sort future directions and grow understanding
- Provide a deeper understanding of the person
- Build intentional safeguards
- Have a forum – a comfortable place to discuss difficult issues
- Grow and deepen relationships.

There are a number of ways in which we can invite people to be involved in the life of our family member:

- Trusted Relationships:* Encouraging friendships that are built on mutual trust and understanding
- Community Living:* Building connections within our own families, neighbourhoods and local communities
- Networks:* Building and maintaining strong networks of people who are supportive and can assist in developing a “good life” for our family member
- Transfer of Information:* Sharing information with trusted others both verbally and in written form
- Resource People:* Choosing resource people such as legal and financial advisors who are willing to work with us and committed others in developing a safe future and a good life
- Planning:* Asking people to join us in planning and decision making for the future
- Circles of Support:* Asking people to join a support circle to develop a deeper understanding of our family member with disability and to plan with us for their present and future by meeting regularly, sharing time, having conversations, being involved in problem solving and sharing celebrations in our family member’s life.

Inviting People in: Safeguarding Strategies.

Trusted Relationships

We know that friendships often form around common interests, being in the same places, getting to know each other and spending time to discover what we have in common. However, what really determines friendship is invisible and it is often easier to define what gets in the way of friendships. We do know that relationships form over time and that whilst we can be deliberate about finding opportunities for people to meet and form friendships, we cannot control or construct them.

Experience tells us that care needs to be taken so that there is time and space for other people to form friendships with people who have disabilities. Sometimes, well meaning paid workers and/or family members can support the person’s needs so efficiently that no time or space is left for other people who may potentially become friends.

Safety is a significant concern for most families but it is important to realise that building relationships will not necessarily be risk free. One of the most difficult challenges may be in traversing the fine line between wanting to keep our sons and daughters safe and learning to build trust. Time is needed to build trust. There is no correct place to start. As with any change, it may be wise to start with one small step and look for opportunities where others can demonstrate their trustworthiness over time. Families may find it useful to start with “safe” roles – giving people the opportunity to get to know their family member at their place and time, inviting people to share meals or occasions, accepting help in small ways that suit the family. Building trust involves risks and only the family can dictate the timing and the steps that suit them.

Community Living

Involving your family member, who has a disability, with their local community, is a significant strategy for safeguarding their future. It is more likely people will look out for them if they are known, valued and belong. Safety is not necessarily guaranteed by their just being there of course. Janet Klees talks about the importance of vigilance in this regard. "Vigilance is recognising and understanding the first signs that what you value and love is being put at risk." (Klees, J 2005, p. 315). For our family member to belong to, and be valued in, the community we may need to be vigilant and take deliberate action in this way.

Deliberate action may also be needed in seeking out opportunities to ensure other people in the community get to know your family member. Parents can play a significant role in this way by being strong ambassadors for their sons and daughters. Where people have forgotten the art of welcoming, families may need to lead the way and be welcoming to others. Sometimes, this involvement may need the skilled assistance of someone else in an existing relationship like extended family members, friends or paid support people in order to bridge understanding and promote positive images and roles. This may be through choices such as whether a person attends the local kindergarten, school, work place or social club. Being thoughtful about our choices can assist people to have lifelong connectedness and belonging. The community as a whole is shaped in a positive way by this growing connectedness. There are many adults who, having spent many years of isolation, have now established connectedness as adults within their community with the support of family and friends. It is never too early or too late to begin to build belonging.

Part of belonging to a community also means being able to contribute to the life of the community. It is therefore very important that families seek out roles for their sons and daughters which are based on their passions, interests and skills.

Although communities are made up of many different people with all their gifts and imperfections, communities can be places of safety and connection, full of warm and generous people where good lives can happen. Our experience is that when people are exposed to a new way of thinking about people who have disabilities and their gifts everyone in the community benefits. Together, we can shape neighbourhoods and communities in unimaginable ways.

Networks

Families can spend a lifetime making connections and seeking out people within their lives, their neighbourhoods, communities and support systems who provide a level of helpfulness and operate as a safeguard in their family member's lives. These connections and relationships vary in depth from the superficial to the significant. The relationship may be with the local store keeper or be with people who advocate strongly for the person, their family and their loved ones. Families use their wisdom, intellect and intuition to filter quality resources and seek out trustworthy people in their sons and daughters lives. These networks are a safeguard in themselves. However, it is useful for families to pass on information about networks to trusted others and even other people in the network. This knowledge assists other family members, friends and allies to connect in times of need or even crisis. When people understand the importance of these networks, they are more likely to do what it takes to make sure that these networks endure in the long term.

Transfer of Information

Families have an intimate knowledge of their sons and daughters. They hold a large number of facts that are essential in building and maintaining good lives for their family members. This includes their history, their likes and dislikes, resources and useful strategies for living every day. Finding a way to record and pass on this information to significant people is essential.

Starting such a project is not easy. It may be helpful to start by writing a list of topics or categories of information that is vital for the safety and quality of life of your loved one. Start small. Pick one topic per week and write as much information as you can think of, including instructions for staff where this is relevant. Give this to other family members, the person with a disability, friends and networks so that they can edit and add as needed.

How this information is collected and organised will be different for each family. Important things to consider, however, are how easily the information can be accessed by those who need it and how easy it is to update the information. Some families have found it useful to use a ring binder or card file for ease of access and to make updating individual sections easier.

Resource People

Families become very discerning about the people who provide support and resources to their sons and daughters. Through this process families will often come to know and understand better than anyone the imperfections of many of the systems set up to support them. There are many experts and many differing opinions about how best to “treat”, “support” and “manage” people’s lives. However, in the final analysis, it is most often parents or other family members or friends who have lived closely with the person with a disability who truly understand their true nature or essence. Given access to relevant information, it is these people who have the wisdom to choose the course of action that will best suit the person with a disability. It makes sense, then, that this wisdom needs to be shared with trusted others if the benefit is to endure into the future. Families and others need to share not only the knowledge but also knowledge of how decisions are made.

Resource people will often be chosen because of their positive attitudes and values as much as for their skills. Key resource people may include doctors, dentists, therapists, hair dressers, support services, lawyers and financial advisors. Having clear instructions from people who know the person with a disability well can assist such key resource people to work well with the person. These instructions, whether verbal or written, need to come from the focus of the person, their giftedness and the long term vision which the family holds. Legal and financial measures such as wills and trusts, for example, become more potent as safeguards if constructed within this framework. Any assistance given to the person with a disability is then more likely to be in line with the family’s vision of a good life and a safe future.

Planning for the Future

Planning is a way of making concrete our hopes and dreams for the future. It is both a way of thinking and an intentional process. Planning is not something that is done once and becomes the master plan forever but rather, is a fluid process that changes as the person changes and grows. When we invite trusted others to join us in planning for the future of our family member who has a disability, we are investing in those people and in their relationships with our family member. Through this growing understanding, we will be providing an opportunity (not a guarantee) for the depth of friendship and relationship that keeps us mutually safe within our family, our neighbourhood and our communities.

In order to plan for the future, we need to be clear about who is the person we are planning for. This seems a simple task. Family will have one perspective, the person themselves will have a unique perspective as will employers, co-workers, teachers, and relatives. Experience shows us that when we

involve other significant people we may end up with a much richer picture of the person - a 360 degree view of who they are.

Clarity about the person requires focus on:

- The giftedness of the person
- What do they do well
- What are their skills and abilities
- What are they passionate about
- What is in their life now
- Who are the important people in their life
- What positive changes do they bring in other people's lives, and
- What we love most about them.

The true essence of a person lies in these aspects. It is this essence of the person that joins them “invisibly” to others. Focusing on the human being or the spirit of a person is very helpful when planning. Relying on the diagnosis or “disability” tag often provides little more than an in-depth knowledge of what the person cannot do. Families have a weighty responsibility to act as ambassadors for their sons and daughters with disabilities. As ambassadors, we can focus on the positive attributes of the person. As ambassadors, we can build on our skills, our use of language and our attention to building connections to other people.

Planning also requires clarity of vision. We will have difficulties planning unless we know where we want to go. A vision is simply a picture or idea about what we want for our sons and daughters and ourselves in the future. Developing a vision is all about allowing ourselves to dream, not being restricted by what others tell us is not possible. When developing a vision, a good place to start is to look at what we want for ourselves and our other family members. This will undoubtedly include wanting our sons and daughters who have disabilities to experience the same joys and challenges as do their siblings. Complexities and struggles are mixed with the opportunities to grow up to love and be loved, to have close and enduring relationships, to have intimate relationships, to live in homes of their own, to contribute to society through work and other activities of their choosing, to be happy, to have fun, to lead rich and rewarding lives, to continue to learn and to grow.

Involvement of others is critical to our planning. Different people will bring knowledge and skills from their life experiences and ideas from their individual perspectives. Inviting others to be part of our planning often allows for more creative and lateral thinking. It will also assist those people who are involved to develop much needed understanding so that they can form deeper relationships as well as invest more commitment into ensuring the long term success of these plans.

Support Circles

Although families will choose a number of different strategies as safeguards for their family member, support circles are a significant safeguard because of their potential enduring nature. Families throughout Queensland continue to provide strong feedback about the value of support circles. In this paper the term, *Support Circle*, is used to describe a deliberate safeguarding strategy where a number of trusted and committed people are invited to meet regularly with a family to have on-going conversations that will assist them in their thinking and planning for the future.

As will be explored in more detail in Part 2, it is the on-going nature of these gatherings that are of particular benefit. The key strength of this concept is that the family dictates the shape, the timing, the membership and the direction of the group. These gatherings focus on the person with a disability with the intent of supporting the family to build and maintain a good life today and into the future. Families give themselves permission to take the time and use the space for valuable thinking that may not happen with the pressures of everyday life. The family's vision is used as a continuing guide for discussions.

When people meet regularly, they develop relationships with the person in a natural way as they develop more in-depth understanding of the person and their family. They not only gain knowledge of the vision that the family holds, they also become a solid part of the process that brings the vision into reality over time. This kind of joint ownership and investment leads to deepening, mutual relationships and to a lasting commitment. As is the case when inviting people into any part of your lives, it is essential to be discerning. It is important to welcome people who care about you, who are willing to make a regular commitment, who are willing to give of their time and energy, and who will bring creativity and positivity to the discussions.

Building Intentional Lifelong Safeguards

PART 2 - SUPPORT CIRCLE: ENDURING SAFEGUARDING STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

In this paper the term, *Support Circle*, is used to describe a deliberate safeguarding strategy where a number of trusted and committed people are invited to join with the family to meet regularly to have on-going conversations that will assist the family in their thinking and planning for the future.

Whilst the organisation of a support circle requires deliberate organisation, the concept is no different from the natural processes we use with family and friends whom we trust when we share important information with each other and support each other emotionally and physically in decision making.

If families believe that their family member's life will be enhanced by inviting people into their lives, they will need to dedicate time to preparation and give thoughtful consideration to membership and be clear about the purpose of a support circle.

Families will need to accept and value the assistance of others. This will be easier if they can see the long term benefits of deepening relationships for their family member.

Function of Support Circles

When families invite people to be a part of a support circle, it is helpful if they are clear about what they are asking people to do and why. We are asking people to come together to have conversations, share ideas and discuss ways of ensuring that the family member who has a disability has a safe and fulfilling life now and into the future. We are NOT asking people to take on the role of parent, unpaid support staff or to fill friendship roles. This does not mean that the family needs to be solely responsible for setting up and maintaining the necessary strategies, as people often step into more active roles in the life of the person as meaningful relationships grow. This will be a vital element of the longevity of the support circle as people will not stay if they cannot see a role for themselves.

The conversations within support circles are on-going and changing in nature because life changes and priorities change. The conversations may centre around the everyday issues that have arisen since people have last met; it may be a problem solving session; it may be about planning the next stage in life e.g. school, housing, relationship building.

The usefulness of these on-going conversations could include:

- Assistance to gain knowledge and understanding of the family's vision and plans for the family member who has a disability
- Assistance with planning for the future
- On-going support through life's challenges and joys

- Support for growing competencies of the family member who has a disability
- Providing commitment and security into the future
- Providing a forum for the person to have a voice
- Providing people who will become advocates if necessary
- Providing guidance to others in formal roles, such as trustees
- Assistance for the family and the person with a disability in their decision making
- Support for the person in practical ways.

What Gatherings Look Like

Every family will approach this gathering of people in a different way. However, gatherings could last for about 2 hours once a month or once every 6 weeks or 2 months.

Some people meet around the kitchen table in the family home; some people feel more at ease sitting around the lounge like they would do at any gathering of family and friends; some people choose to meet in the family home or in the home of the person with a disability or in the home of one of the support circle members; other people may seek out a more neutral venue like a meeting room. This is particularly useful if they intend to do a more structured planning session.

While it is important not to lose the focus of the gathering (i.e. the person and future safeguards), families who have support circles speak of the importance of being welcoming and providing hospitality. Some families supply a morning or afternoon tea and some support circles organise a BBQ or meal afterwards. Whilst celebration is a great part of this concept, it should not be a cause for anxiety for the family. Simple is best. Support circles are places where people love to contribute and share.

Inviting Others

Families often feel that asking people to join a support circle is a difficult thing to do. The fear that a family may feel in asking is real and not to be negated. However, the effort and risk is worth it when they consider the long term benefits for their family member. It is very important that families examine their belief systems and put thought and deliberate planning into the asking. Both how people are asked and who will be asked needs time and consideration. However, families invariably use good judgement about the people in their lives.

Each family will have a different perspective about who should be included or not included. Sometimes, families will say that they have no-one who they can ask. In some situations, sadly, this is so. However, the most helpful starting point will be to suspend doubt and judgement and simply list all the possible people who may be suitable. Then, together as a family, decisions can be made as to the final list based on mutual agreement. Examples include the cousin who visits when in town or a past teacher who always showed an interest, even busy people who you may not think will have the time. Sometimes, when you suspend your own judgement or nervousness and allow people to respond, they are very happy to be part of this exciting group. Success may require a shift in thinking from “I am inviting people to a

burdensome task” to “I am inviting people to contribute in a positive way that will be a valuable experience from which they will benefit”.

Experience has shown that when families take time and are discerning and clear about what they are asking of people, the invitees are most likely to say, “yes”.

Common responses to being asked include:

- It would be a privilege/pleasure
- I have always wanted to help and to be involved, but did not want to offend you by intruding
- I have always admired what you do for your son/daughter
- I would love to be involved.

However, if people say “no”, it is vital to remember that it does not mean they reject the family or the person who has a disability. There are many reasons why someone may not be able to attend. Sometimes people do not feel that they can commit to regular gatherings as part of a support circle but they will continue to sustain strong and positive relationships or they will offer to help in some other way.

Conversely, there will be people who the family will decide not invite despite their having very positive roles and relationships with the person who has a disability.

Strategies of Asking

Families may have less stress in asking if they are clear about what they are asking of people. Remember that you are simply asking people to have conversations, to share their wisdom and to help you plan for the future. It is important to keep in perspective that you are only asking a time commitment of about two hours per month and you are certainly NOT asking people to be pseudo-parents or to take on the type of responsibilities that families hold.

Inviting others to the table becomes easier when you focus on the love you feel for your son or daughter and you reflect on the gifts and contributions that they have made to your life. In fact, Gillian Chernetts proposes that we would be selfish not to share those gifts with others.

Each family will choose a different way of asking but feedback from families suggests there are some helpful strategies which include:

Plan for success: When asking, start with the person who is most likely to say yes. If asking is so difficult, ask your most trusted friend to help you think through who you could ask and how best to ask. This means that an otherwise daunting task becomes broken down into one first manageable step. Success will build your courage significantly.

Ask in writing: The advantage of a written invitation is that the family can refine what they want to say through editing and re-editing if necessary. The family can be very considered and clear about what they are asking.

Be clear: It is important to be clear about what you are asking of people. Some families write out what they want to say so that when they are speaking to the person by phone or in person.

Invite people to an information session: Some families invite people to a social occasion where they, a close friend or someone with experience in circles of support comes to speak about the concept.

This approach can seem less confronting. It allows the possible invitee to get a clear picture of why it is important and what the process entails prior to them being asked. In this way, the invitee may have time to consider and reply without pressure.

Have someone else do the asking: Families sometimes feel awkward about asking because they feel that people are too busy or that it is a lot to ask of people. If this is the case, we suggest that the asking might be done by someone they trust. The disadvantage of someone else doing the asking is that the family will miss out on the direct feedback which can be so positive and affirming.

Who to invite?

- People from our everyday life
- Friends
- People we trust
- Ordinary people who are part of a typical neighbourhood and community
- People who know and understand us or are prepared to develop that understanding
- People who believe in our family member with a disability
- People who have supported our efforts on behalf of our family member who has a disability
- Relatives who love us and support us.

Why People Come

People will join a support circle for a wide variety of reasons. These might include:

- Because of their connectedness to the family
- Because of their admiration for the family's efforts on behalf of the family member
- Because of a deep respect for the family and the friendship they share
- Because of the love that they hold for the family member and/or the family
- Because they already have an unshakable belief in the person and want a good future for them and see support circles as an opportunity to help that happen.

Whatever the reason for coming, people speak positively about the process - how it is a privilege to be asked and how it has changed their own lives and deepened their relationships. People have spoken about changed attitudes, having their understanding enriched, their skills validated and being valued by the family. A significant number of people speak of benefits of the honesty that ensues - where the good and the bad are experienced and where people celebrate each other's achievements. For some, it has assisted them to re-establish a sense of family, a sense of neighbourhood involvement and/or community in their lives. Circle members appreciate the deepening relationships with the person, the family and with other members of the support circle. People find a forum to contribute their skills, abilities and opinions in a way that makes a difference.

What Families Bring to this

- Allowing others to contribute to the thinking and the doing may not always come naturally. Families know their son or daughter best and have a lifetime of experience to fall back on whereas others will need to learn these skills and will need to practice making decisions.
- Families need to let go of the habit of doing it all themselves. Sometimes, families do everything so well that other people see them as so capable that they feel there is little space for them to contribute. Even siblings sometimes have this view about their parents.
- The family may need to let go of some myths e.g. they can construct a perfect circle; they can keep their family member safe all by themselves. Support circles are an opportunity to build safety in an imperfect world but there are no guarantees. However, the meetings provide a forum for on-going vigilance and a place where the group can develop strategies to ensure future safety.
- Families may need to learn to face their fears head on. Fears may include the fear of “failure” or that something will go wrong or that things will not work out.
- Families may need to let go of past hurts and injustices. Support circle members need to understand the history of the family member with a disability but, only in so far as it informs future actions. Support Circles are about positive action for the future well-being of the person.
- Some families may have a fear of rejection. If you believe that people are likely to reject you or your loved one, you will be reluctant to ask. Fear of rejection from people you trust causes even greater fear than if the people are strangers.
- If you believe that you are asking people to share a “burden”, the roadblock will be significant as it will seem too much to ask of another person.

What Works Well in Support Circles

A number of families who have embarked on support circles have shared their wisdom about what they have found useful. These include:

- Being open and honest
- Building opportunities to learn to build trust
- People having roles and tasks that they assume when comfortable
- Taking the time that is necessary to grow rather than to force outcomes
- Being clear about what the family wants for the future
- Being positive – working for a solution rather than staying embedded in the problem
- Making use of people’s gifts and wisdoms
- Choosing people with thought
- Keeping notes for future reference
- Doing the ground work to have a considered starting point

- Allowing the group to take some responsibility in the future of the group i.e. planning for the continuity, future membership etc
- Being welcoming and accepting of the imperfections of people and processes
- Having someone facilitate the process
- Taking time to celebrate.

Facilitation

The word, facilitator, means “to make easy” or “to help progress”.

Families can benefit greatly from having a facilitator for their support circle. Facilitators are people who have a belief and trust in the wisdom of families, including the person who has the disability. Facilitation is characterised by the ability to start where the family and the circle are at, but also, to keep in mind the overall vision.

It is crucial that facilitators understand the limitations of their role. A facilitator does not direct the future or the direction of the circle, does not control the process and is not the font of all knowledge. “A facilitator must be someone comfortable in saying “I don’t know;” they must also be prepared to ask a question and then sit in the discomfort and the quiet of no response.” (Reaching Out p.45. Sharon, Burnaby BC).

Initially, the facilitator’s role is to listen to the family in order to gain an understanding of the family culture and values, to listen to what the family wants to achieve, to support the family through the asking if needed and to assist in organising the gathering and assisting with the process of the meeting/gathering and keeping the focus.

Each family and each person with a disability will bring a different set of perspectives which will flavour the direction of the process. The facilitator will assist the group to see the link between the discussion and the future and will also honour the family’s life experiences, histories and beliefs.

Facilitators can assist the family and circle members by modelling clarity about the vision and clarity about the person. The facilitator will also be mindful of the importance of the growing resource that develops within the support circle and will encourage the collective wisdom of the people who have been invited.

The facilitator needs to be skilled in creating a place in which all members of the support circle feel comfortable to have focused conversations without actually controlling these conversations. Sometimes, this will mean encouraging people to share their opinions, particularly the quieter members of the group. Sensitivity may also be needed so that members do not feel put on the spot.

The facilitator will need to be someone who is respectful of the family, the person with a disability and all circle members. Payment is not always required but if it is, may come from the family or an agency or may be sourced from the person’s own resources.

The facilitator can assist the family (only as is needed):

- To have conversations around the concept of support circle
- Through the process of identifying who they might invite

- Through the asking if needed
- To talk about the concept at initial gathering, support circles and their history
- To work through the agenda set by the person and the family
- To facilitate brainstorming of ideas
- To assist the person, their family and circle members to move forward in line with their vision and planning
- Through on-going process of conversation with the support circle
- To ensure the person with a disability has a voice within the circle
- To clarify what is being said so that there is a shared understanding
- To build confidence in the group by demonstrating a valuing of their contributions and by encouraging members to take roles and develop skills
- To ensure that over time, everyone in the circle understands the process so people from within the group grow more comfortable taking ownership alongside the family for the process
- To develop comfort and ease within the group
- To foster and encourage leadership in the person and the circle members
- By gently reminding circle members of the boundaries set by the family about what is private business and what is circle business
- By assisting to set up with the family a comfortable environment so that an on-going forum is established where deep conversations can occur
- By providing reminders about the importance of reflection
- By facilitating participation of all members of the circle
- By keeping to time
- By providing a sounding board for the family and the circle where required
- By raising awareness of helpful strategies used by others e.g. annual review where issues like longer term planning and membership are discussed and of course, celebration happens.

Where to Find a Facilitator

The facilitator is someone who will be “connected to the community: believe that all belong; see and nurture capacities and gifts of everyone; problem-solvers;...listeners; good communicators;” (p.43 PLAN Institute Chpt VII Reaching Out).

Facilitators come from many different backgrounds but share the ability to deeply listen, to observe, to be deliberate in connecting people, and in using processes and questions rather than supplying answers.

The choice of a facilitator will be personal to each family. They may be someone known to the family or to members of the circle, or known to a trusted friend. They may be someone who works in the community in a similar role. They may be a person who may have formerly held a paid role with the family.

CONCLUSION

In whatever way families develop or choose strategies to involve others, the success of this concept lies in the ability to be able to let go of perhaps a habit of a life time – doing things exceptionally well and with great passion and determination but alone or in isolation.

When we speak of inviting people in or support circles, we need to be clear that this concept does not resemble setting up a committee. It is not about being controlling. It is not about following anyone else's rules or recipes. It is about commitment to an idea, knowing that it is probably the best guess we have about keeping our family member safe. It is about families being deliberate, steering the direction and sharing their vision. It is about understanding that safety does not come from inflexibility or in places, but that safety rests with people and the depth of relationships they share over a life time.

So when we talk of inviting people in, we are talking about real people, real lives filled with imperfections. These concepts ask families to trust in their own abilities to form, deepen and maintain relationships. Often, it is our sons and daughters, who are judged to be lacking so many skills, who can and will teach us all about the art of relationships. My experience is that people are drawn to my son because of something I cannot see but something I, too, feel deeply in my heart. It is not about what he can do; what matters is who he is. Enduring relationships take work, love and luck, each in some proportion. Families work hard for their sons and daughters, finding and expanding opportunities. We are suggesting that being deliberate, being clear and working with and planning with trusted others may provide a greater chance that our efforts will be sustained into the future. Human beings need the opportunity to spend time together regularly over time so as to provide the fertile ground for growth of understanding and relationship. Families need to deepen their faith in their own abilities and wisdom. People know how to grow natural and abiding connections with others.

Every relationship will be different, imperfect and yet perfect for you when it is embedded in mutuality. The future is an ever-changing landscape of friendships and relationships that weave together to provide a blanket of safety on which we all can lie. The relationships that exist in our support circles today will inform the next generation. Children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews will grow up accepting that support circles are a part of life, a place where we talk, plan and celebrate. They, in turn, will step up and inform the visions and dreams of futures before us.

Inviting people in is the key to safeguarding our family member with a disability because people keep people safe. It may take courage and work. It will definitely take time and consideration. It will most certainly be an imperfect process as life and people change and grow. Families are the greatest resource and each has their own unique wisdom and way of doing things. It takes clarity, courage, and willingness to embark on a new way of thinking and a new way being.

When you find the way,
others will find you.
Passing on the road
they will be drawn to your door.
The way that cannot be heard
will be echoed in your voice.
The way that cannot be seen
will be reflected in your eyes.
Lao-tzu

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